

Editor's Note

Nicole Rust's profile "The Thread of Spirit" concentrates mostly on the biographical elements of Russell Brown's life. For example, the author writes, "At a very young age Father Russ had established a genuine love for people. Constantly taking notes, he paid attention to every detail in the world around him." Do these elements come together to create a cohesive depiction of Father Russ, or are there gaps that you would like to see filled?

How does Rust incorporate the title of her essay into the content? As a reader, can you determine what "The Thread of Spirit" means to Father Russ? What does someone typically visualize when he/she thinks of a priest? Does Rust's profile challenge any common conceptions of a priest's life? If yes, then what is challenged? Examine the transitions between paragraphs. For instance, Russ ends paragraph four mentioning how Father Russ began his "faith journey," and she transitions into her fifth paragraph with the same key phrase, "This 'faith journey'" continued after two years. . . ."Focus on other transitions and determine if they move the essay forward effectively.

The Thread of Spirit

Nicole Rust

The first time I met Father Russell Brown it became very clear that the title "Father Russ" suited him in more ways than one. Not only did it suit him in the religious sense because he is a Catholic Priest, but also because of his dad-like appearance. He has what I consider to be the typical father figure: six feet tall, two hundred-fifty pounds, and a pudgy stomach that reminds me of my dad dressing up like Santa Claus for Christmas. When he's not dressed in his standard religious attire, Brown casually wears handmade knitted sweaters, khaki pants held up by a leather belt, and some worn old-fashioned loafers. These are just the minimal things that give him the father figure. What really gives it away is the tone of his voice. He has a voice like a weathered sailor, deep and full of experience; it has enough roughness to make him appear wise and full of stories, but just enough warmth to penetrate my soul with love.

Father Russ welcomed me with open arms and a compassionate smile. His presence created a sense of home and late nights by the fireplace sharing embarrassing family stories. I felt at this moment that I already knew everything about Father Russ. However, as his story unfolded I realized that my preconceived notions of this man

were completely misguided by my stereotypical image of a priest. I was expecting him to have been raised Catholic, in a big family, serving most of his adolescent years as a naive and innocent altar boy, but soon found that he had spent most of his time studying world issues and preparing for a degree in journalism. Surprisingly, at different points of our lives we had been on the same path. I was now determined to find out what steered Brown away from journalism and why a man with so many “dad-like” qualities wouldn’t want a family of his own.

I started with the basic question, “What led you to the priesthood?” I was expecting some textbook answer like my prayers or a divine intervention. So imagine my surprise when Father Russ responded, “Journalism, a compassion for people, and a search for the truth.” I am journalism major at Cal Poly, so I couldn’t wait to hear more about his experiences “searching for the truth.” I chose to major in journalism because I am hoping to learn the truth and write it. This made me very curious. How on earth could a degree in journalism lead anyone to becoming a priest? As I learned more about Father Russ’s journey, he explained that his path was guided through what he refers to as “a thread of spirit.”

Growing up, Brown describes himself as being very compassionate and trustworthy. He was, as I suspected, a young boy with a pure spirit, but he was also curious. While other kids would make fun of the old man with Parkinson’s disease who lived on the corner, young Russell Brown was always eager to listen to the old man’s stories and learn any life lessons the old man was willing to share. At a very young age, Father Russ had established a genuine love for people. Constantly taking notes, he paid attention to the every detail of the world around him. He hoped that one day all his notes would amount to “the meaning of life.” Brown devoted most of his adolescence to helping friends at the local community church. He was raised in the Methodist church for the eighteen years he lived with his parents but was not very active spiritually at this time. After graduating from high school he went off to Santa Clara University where he was first introduced to Catholicism; he found it suited him. He liked the way it allowed him to think analytically and felt it to be very “intellectually vigorous” (Brown). Father Russ was not ready to commit to a religion now, so he began what he calls his “faith journey.”

This “faith journey” continued after two years at Santa Clara University when he transferred to San Jose State to study journalism. He picked journalism because he was a man in search of the truth; little did he know the truth he was in search of was not of this world but of another. While studying at San Jose State he wrote for the *Spartan Daily* and researched a number of “worldly” issues, such as politics and culture. However, the more political issues he studied or current events he critiqued, the farther away his truth seemed to be. After receiving a degree in Journalism, but

still not fulfilled, Brown moved to UC Santa Cruz and worked for university housing. He worked with a number of kids, trained RAs, and kept track of 465 UC Santa Cruz students and nourished his love of people. He continued his education in Santa Cruz, studying anthropology, world religions, and history; this is where the real answers were hiding.

Anthropology was Father Russ's favorite subject in school because in this study he found a distinct pattern that caught his eye; he described it as a "thread of spirit." When explaining this to me, he smiled a big grin and said, "Broad across all cultures, you'll always find a connection through spirit or some sort of spiritual component." This was the epiphany he had been in search of.

In 1992, Father Russell Brown committed to becoming a Catholic. This was the point in his life where he said, "Well, it's time to choose, you can't speak language, you have to speak g language, and you can't practice religion, you have to practice g religion" (Brown). After his confirmation, he continued to pursue journalism in Santa Cruz. He worked as an editorial clerk for *Mercury News*; it was in this company that Brown hoped to start his journalist career.

However, much to Brown's surprise the deeper he got into the field, the more unsatisfied he felt. It was the materialism and cutthroat nature of the workplace, as well as the lies and fabrication of stories that led him to ask, "Is this where I want to be for the rest of my life?" Eventually, Father Russ decided that it was *not* where he wanted to be and quit his job at the *Mercury News*. It takes a great amount of strength to make the choice Father Russ did. Father Russell could have stuck it out and ended up like most people, with a mediocre job, generally unsatisfied, but financially stable. Instead, he chose to take a chance, and try something completely new—the priesthood.

He now devotes his life to carrying out the traditions of his church, hearing people's deepest confessions, and preparing speeches about moral struggles for his parish. Although he quit the newspaper business, he never quit being a journalist. He uses his degree in journalism to write powerful sermons and speak in front of hundreds of people every Sunday. At first glance going from journalist to priest seems like a big change, but as Father Russ explains they go hand in hand.

All those years studying journalism have given Father Russ the necessary tools to be a priest in today's society. He is able use his love for writing and public speaking in a spiritual way. One of his duties as a priest is to write the "homily" or talk that he presents at his church every Sunday. When Father Russ prepares for this, he combines the writing techniques he learned as a writer and the "quick study" techniques of a journalist. With this knowledge, Father Russ finds ways to reach out to

what he calls his “holy family.” This term “holy family” made me wonder why a man with so many father-like qualities did not want a family of his own.

But from the way he describes his “holy family” and the responsibility he feels for members of his church, it is clear that this is the sort of “parenting” he was meant to do. He is able to be the listener of the family when he listens to people’s confessions. He is able to be the faithful spouse of the family through his marriage to the church. And he is able to be the encouraging role model of the family when he gives guidance to his parishioners. Father Russ is able to be a “free-lance spiritual journalist,” while being the spiritual father of hundreds of people and that is what suits him best.

What I found very surprising about Father Russ is that he was confirmed as a Catholic fifteen years ago and ordained a priest only three years ago. He had a very full life before choosing to devote himself to the church; he took the time to educate himself about a variety of religions, politics, and cultures before settling for Catholicism.

Although I was only able to meet with Father Russ for an hour and a half, it is clear that he has taken the time to educate himself about the world we live in. I know that if I ever have a problem or need advice, I can go to him and trust that he will either be an excellent listener or give me the insight that I need from the knowledge he has gained over his many years of study. It is very interesting that a man who started out on a search for truth, found a little thread of spirit and through that spirit was able to find his way to what he calls his “most meaningful profession.”

Work Cited

Brown, Russell. Personal Interview. 9 Oct. 2007.

Nicole Rust is a journalism major.